

The Farrier’s Corner: by Ray and Michelle Smith

Poisonous plants and mushrooms

Over 700 North American plants are poisonous to horses. Even though many toxic plants and fungi are bitter and unpalatable, horses will occasionally consume them for various reasons. Horses on poor quality pasture will attempt to eat, what is available. Horses can also consume toxic plants baled in hay. Some ornamentals are appealing to horses and are often reached through fences or eaten when lawn and hedge trimmings are tossed into pastures. Horses are not capable of vomiting. Once a toxic substance is swallowed, they cannot regurgitate it.

Southern Oregon is known for its abundance of mushrooms. While some species are harmless and edible, others are deadly. Several years ago, we had the opportunity to attend a veterinary presentation on mushroom poisoning in horses. Mushroom poisoning is seen in Southern Oregon in horses as well as dogs. In general, mushroom poisoning is believed to be an underestimated problem in companion animals.

While some species of mushrooms cause only mild symptoms, others cause severe reactions following even minimal exposure. Some species are so toxic that full ingestion is not required, only direct contact with mucus membranes of the nose or mouth. Mushrooms in the species Amanita (so-called death angel mushrooms), Galerina and Lepiota have the highest number of confirmed fatalities.

Symptoms of mushroom poisoning vary by species and specific toxins. They may include colic, diarrhea, change in heart rate, difficulty breathing, head pressing, neurological symptoms, disorientation, liver or kidney damage, jaundice and death.

If you suspect mushroom poisoning, contact a vet immediately. If you collect a mushroom for identification, be careful not to handle it with bare hands. Mushrooms are notoriously difficult to identify and harmless varieties often have poisonous look a likes.

Azaleas and Rhododendrons are common locally and toxic to horses. Both contain a toxic substance known as grayanotoxin. There are many varieties of Azaleas and Rhododendrons and toxicities vary. Azalea leaves and nectar are toxic. An average 1,000 pound horse would need to consume 2 pounds or more of leaves to exhibit symptoms of poisoning. That is a

considerable amount. However, horses can eat large amounts of vegetation in a short time. Symptoms of poisoning can include excess salivation, colic, diarrhea, slow heart rate, cardiac arrhythmias, muscle weakness and vision problems. It is treatable, but if left untreated, it can result in death.

The entire rhododendron plant is toxic. Consumption of 1 to 2 pounds of green leaves by a 1,000 pound horse can result in poisoning. Symptoms may include excess salivation, diarrhea, colic, stupor, weakness, paralysis of legs and lowered heart rate. It can be fatal.

Cannabis has an interesting history with horses. Ancient Greek writers mention it as an equine wound dressing. During the old days of the mounted U.S. Cavalry, it was present in various elixirs to treat colic.

For the purpose of this article, we are looking at Cannabis sativa and the effects of accidental over ingestion of the growing plant. Cannabis sativa is recognized as toxic to horses and dogs. The specific toxic component is Delta-9-THC (tetrahydrocannabinol). Death from over ingestion is rare, but there can be serious side effects including: prolonged depression, hyper salivation, incoordination, sleepiness or excitability, dilated pupils, low blood pressure, low body temperature, seizures and coma.

Cherry leaves, including Choke Cherries, are toxic when wilted. Wilting causes the release of cyanide within the leaves and makes the leaves taste sweet. Frosted leaves, or wilted leaves on downed branches, should be removed from pastures as soon as possible.

Maple leaves also become toxic when wilted. Following consumption, symptoms may appear relatively quickly or may not show up for several days. Maple poisoning causes the breakdown of red blood cells, can damage the liver and kidneys and result in death.

The prognosis is good if treatment is started before the appearance of symptoms. Once symptoms appear, aggressive in-hospital care is needed.

Oak trees are common in local forests and pastures. Generally, this is not a problem as most horses do not eat heavily from oaks. However, some horses develop a taste for them and can be poisoned by various parts of the tree. Oak poisoning is seasonal. In

the spring, it results from ingesting young leaves and buds. In the fall, acorns are to blame. The culprit in poisoning is believed to be tannic acid. Horses kept on dry lots or sparse pasture will sometimes resort to eating acorns and leaves. Oak poisoning can result in bloating or colic, kidney damage and laminitis (founder).

Oleander is an extremely toxic plant and a common ornamental. Oleander contains compounds that interfere with the electrical conductivity of the heart. It also causes photosensitivity, and peeling of the skin on the tongue and inside the mouth. As little as 30 to 40 leaves can prove deadly to adult horses. The toxic compounds are found throughout the plant with the highest concentrations in the fruit, flowers and immature leaves. Dried leaves retain their toxicity.

Yew is planted ornamentally and used in holiday greenery. All parts of the plant, except the fleshy fruit of the red berries, are toxic. Yew remains toxic when dried. Horses are most commonly poisoned by hedge clip-

pings tossed into pastures and by eating yew from holiday wreaths hung in barns. A few mouthfuls can be sufficient to kill a 1,000 pound horse.

Sudden death is the most common sign of yew ingestion. However it can take up to an hour for symptoms to present. Death usually follows within 15 to 30 minutes of symptom appearance.

Treatment may be attempted on animals that have only ingested very small amounts however prognosis is poor and death is usual.

In closing, be aware of poisonous plants in your area. Choose ornamentals carefully and research their toxicity. Never throw unidentified yard trimmings into your pasture and choose holiday barn décor carefully. If you suspect your horse has been poisoned, contact a veterinarian immediately. If possible, provide a sample of what has been eaten.

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